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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 000393

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/C AND INL/C
TREASURY FOR FINCEN
JUSTICE FOR PATRICIA PETTY OIA
COMMERCE FOR ITA BURRESS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/27/2019
TAGS: [KCOR](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [CM](#)
SUBJECT: NOTHING SACRED: POPE'S BUDGET PILFERED BY
COMMUNICATIONS MINISTER

REF: YAOUNDE 286

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Classified By: Political Officer Tad Brown for reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (SBU) Cameroonian legal authorities are investigating allegations that Communication Minister Jean-Pierre Biyiti Bi Essam embezzled 130,000,000 CFA (about \$250,000) of the 700,000,000 CFA (about \$1.4 million) his ministry received for Pope Benedict XVI's March 17-20 visit to Yaounde (reftel). Cameroonian media outlets--which have no love lost for Biyiti Bi Essam's imperious management of the press--have devoted extensive coverage to the allegations and we have been told Minister of Justice Amadou Ali has ordered a thorough audit of the 5.8 billion CFA (about \$11.6 million) that the Government of Cameroon (GRC) spent--much of it in cash--for the Papal visit. We are encouraged to see the GRC respond relatively swiftly to investigate the allegations, but Biyiti Bi Essam's misdeeds are but a drop in Cameroon's ocean of financial mismanagement and kleptocracy. End summary.

Papal Visits Don't Come Cheaply

12. (SBU) Media reports, confirmed by sources with access to Cameroon's budget figures, indicate the GRC spent 5.8 billion CFA (about \$11.6 million) for the March 17-20 visit of Pope Benedict XVI (reftel). Biyiti Bi Essam, already resented by the independent media for his disdain of press freedoms and his imperious management of the media sector, received 700,000,000 CFA (about \$1.4 million) to ensure the Pope's visit received extensive coverage in the government-owned and private press. In the days leading up to Benedict's arrival, many in the independent press complained that they had not received the subsidies they were promised. Biyiti Bi Essam was heavily criticized when the GRC-owned CRTV television broadcast of the Pope's arrival was unable to provide live coverage of the Pope's progression from the airport through the City of Yaounde.

Don't Mix Work and
Pleasure (Bank Accounts)

13. (C) Biyiti Bi Essam's most recent and most serious troubles began when Cameroon's National Agency for Financial Investigations (ANIF) detected suspicious transactions in his personal account and alerted judicial authorities. Post

received a copy of a letter that Minister of Justice Amadou Ali sent to the Presidency, which included ANIF's original report and photocopies of bank statements showing the transfer, in two payments, of 130,000,000 CFA into Biyiti Bi Essam's personal account with the French Societe General des Banques in Cameroon (SGBC). ANIF's file includes a letter from Minister of Finance Essimi Menye confirming that Biyiti Bi Essam received a total of 700,000,000 CFA.

Caught in the Cookie Jar

14. (C) The prosecutor for the Yaounde High Court deposed Biyiti Bi Essam for three hours on April 23. In his own comments to the media, Biyiti Bi Essam claimed he received the funds from the Ministry of Finance in "sacks of cash" after business hours. Claiming he tried to identify a safe where he could guard the funds, Biyiti Bi Essam insists he placed the funds in his account only for safe-keeping and that he can prove that all funds were spent appropriately. Hubert Nde Sambone, the Director of ANIF, told Poloff on April 23 that even if Biyiti Bi Essam truly spent the money appropriately (a supposition Sambone did not find credible), the simple act of placing the funds in a personal account is a flagrant violation of the laws governing the use of GRC funds.

Comment: Good News for ANIF
is Good News for the USG

15. (C) Post and other USG agencies have engaged heavily with ANIF, so we are especially gratified to see ANIF receive credit for discovering Biyiti Bi Essam's mismanagement of GRC funds. We are also encouraged to see the growing trust and

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communication between ANIF (which falls under the Ministry of Finance) and the Ministry of Justice, which has been wary of collaborating with "outside" investigators. Whereas Ali had previously told us he did not launch high-profile court cases without Biya's green light and never against a sitting minister, the swift response by judicial authorities may help establish a precedent for future cases.

Comment: A Drop in an Ocean
of Mismanagement

16. (C) Whatever the outcome of Biyiti Bi Essam's journey through the judicial system, the larger problem remains Cameroon's pervasive mismanagement of its budget and resources. The GRC, recently emerged from multilateral debt relief worth almost \$5 billion, continues to manage public funds like a multibillion dollar petty cash fund. We have received first-hand accounts of Biya's entourage paying to refuel his airplane with suitcases filled with hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash. When Biya traveled to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2008, a member of his entourage was caught as he tried to escape from Biya's Geneva hotel with a bag filled with 3,400,000 CFA (about \$6.8 million) in cash. We continue to engage with ANIF and others struggling to save Cameroon from its own debilitating corruption, but our success will be limited until the GRC begins conducting itself with greater accountability. End comment.

FOX